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ABSTRACT

The National School Boards Association has developed a new statement that identifies four themes of governance for school boards today: setting the vision for education in the local community; establishing the structure and environment to implement the vision; assessing performance progress toward achieving the vision; and being the preeminent advocate for the public schools and their students. This article on vision and educational leadership is the first of four articles that will address each of the governance themes. Burt Nanus, professor of management and director of research at the Leadership Institute, University of Southern California, suggests that the central requirement of visionary leadership is the ability to make appropriate changes. Nanus offers the following suggestions for the "prudent visionary": (1) do not do it alone; (2) do not be overly optimistic; (3) reduce the possibility of unpleasant surprises; (4) watch out for organizational inertia; (5) do not be too preoccupied with the bottom line; (6) be flexible and patient in implementing the vision; and (7) never get complacent. (MLF)

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by Karen Powe

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Visionary Leadership and the Waves of the Future

by Karen Powe

> *"I have conceived of many plans, but I was never free to execute one of them. For all that I held the rudder, and with a strong hand, the waves were always a good deal stronger."*
>
> —Napoleon

In response to the profound and continuing changes in American society and the needs of local school boards in acknowledging the changes, the National School Boards Association has developed a new statement of philosophy for educational governance in the 1990s. Entitled "The Local School Board and the New Realities," the statement focuses on the overall policymaking role of local school boards as an integral part of the American institution of democratic, representative and accountable governance. This philosophical statement, which was approved by the 1992 Delegate Assembly at the NSBA Convention & Exposition in Orlando, Florida (April, 1992), identifies four themes of governance for school boards today:

- setting the vision for education in the local community;
- establishing the structure and environment to implement the vision;
- assessing performance progress towards achieving the vision; and
- being the preeminent advocate for the public schools and their students.

This article on vision and educational leadership is the first of four articles that will appear in *Updating School Board Policies* during the coming months addressing each of the governance themes.

The Vision

Setting a vision is not just a new way of saying "goal setting" or "long-range planning." It is a primary responsibility for today's school leaders, and it encompasses the best in forward-thinking, innovative planning and community involvement. It is a demanding task, but not a daunting one.

Visionary leadership involves:

- critical evaluation of your past and present plans, your achievements, and the need for reassessment/revision of your goals;
- identification of trends and emerging issues, and consideration of their potential impact on your policies and programs;
- establishment of achievable goals, based on the knowledge and experience you have gained from the past and your determination of future needs;
- commitment to the vision (No one ever succeeded in leading an effort to which s/he was not personally committed.)
- involvement of others in the development of the vision and empowerment of them to act on its implementation; and
- willingness to make the changes necessary to enhance your success potential.

Burt Nanus, professor of management and director of research at the Leadership Institute, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, has described both the personal commitment demanded by visionary leadership and its legacy:

> "When your tenure is over and you pass the mantle on to someone else, you want that person to be able to say, 'There was a person who helped us see how great we could be, and who laid the foundation for our great leap forward.'"
>
> ("Visionary Leadership: How to Re-Vision the Future." *Futurist*, September-October, 1992.

Dr. Nanus suggests that the central requirement of visionary leadership is the ability to make appropriate changes. He says the we must continually track changes and make the necessary adjustments to our vision, noting that, "Nothing could be more common in

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organizations than a vision that has overstayed its welcome...The vision may, in fact, have been the right one at the time it was formulated, but rarely is right for all time. The world changes, and so must the vision."

Examples abound and include the virtual elimination of the asbestos industry as a result of changing environmental and health needs, and the impact of increasing international competition on U.S. television and automobile manufacturers.

Consider some other examples from the business community: Why would IBM form a joint venture with one of its primary competitors, Apple Computers, Inc.? Why would Atlantic Richfield Oil Company advocate and promote low-emissions gasoline? Because they responded to new external challenges that threatened their traditional operations.

They did not wait, Dr. Nanus suggests, as the automobile companies appear to be doing. At the 3M Company (Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing), one-third of the annual sales are from products developed within the last 5 years. Dr. Nanus points out that "...[the] entrepreneur, [the] innovator...are just visionary leaders by another name."

In order to make changes, school boards need to ensure that the ability to change exists. The change factor has implications for our future consideration of the organizational structure and environment in the school district, and we will deal with this issue in greater depth in the next article of this series.

For our purposes here, it will suffice to say that institutional change can occur only when four basic conditions exist:

- there is mutual trust and sufficient openness to allow people to recommend and to try change without feeling threatened;
- widespread participation in the change process is encouraged;
- a diversity of skills and viewpoints are represented; and
- there is lots of feedback.

This last point is the way in which we can track salient information and identify emerging issues. Ensuring that decisionmakers receive that feedback is achieved by:

- establishing broad networks;
- polling the community on a continuing basis about needs;
- listening to the perspectives offered by outside speakers; and
- using expert consultants (both "outsiders" and "insiders") to help in developing the plans and programs that are truly visionary.

Lest all this talk about visionary leadership be viewed as just advice from the proverbial Ivory Tower, i.e., a notion put forward by theoreticians, rather than practitioners, Dr. Nanus provides some real world advice on how to avoid vision failures. His recommendations (indicated by quotation marks), augmented by those of school board members across the country, follow.

Suggestions for the "Prudent Visionary"

1. "DON'T DO IT ALONE."

Solicit suggestions from others and promote wide participation in developing and implementing the vision. This approach will ensure that you are considering all the alternatives in preparing the school district for changes and "possibly disarming those who would resist these changes." Ask what others think should be done. Collect information and advice from teachers, school personnel, parents, community members, business leaders and students about what could be better and how changes could be made. Consider a board retreat to discuss alternatives and explore future possibilities.

2. "DON'T BE OVERLY OPTIMISTIC."

Be realistic; new ideas or approaches will lose impact if they are seen as too ambitious. "Test the vision with knowledgeable outsiders" and insiders. "In the end, however, as long as the vision appears attainable — even if it requires extraordinary efforts and some lucky breaks for it to be so — don't be afraid to stretch a little and go for it."

3. "REDUCE THE POSSIBILITY OF UNPLEASANT SURPRISES."

Try to anticipate all the future possibilities by thinking through everything that might occur; listen to all available expert opinions; critically examine "conventional wisdom;" and lay out the full range of options.

"...build flexibility into the vision statement itself, not getting too specific where it is not necessary to do so." A flexible response process will allow you to react more quickly to changes or unanticipated occurrences with minimal disruption.

Employ the continuing evaluation techniques that you would use with any new program or policy. In the case of your vision statement, you will want to track trends and emerging issues in order to be prepared for their effects on your future. Dr. Nanus points out that "A wise leader doesn't wait for the alert to

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be sounded before thinking of alternative/new directions."

4. "WATCH OUT FOR ORGANIZATIONAL INERTIA."

Organizations are particularly resistant to change. This includes school districts but, it is not — as suggested by the critics of the public school system — necessarily a negative factor. Sometimes resistance may prevent us from making unnecessary or unwise changes, and can prevent us from reacting too quickly and/or inappropriately to the crisis of the moment. However, that same resistance can also prevent needed change. Often, it is organizational structure that impedes our ability to respond to new requirements. Perhaps a review of that structure and some internal reorganization will broaden the system's capacity for accepting, even encouraging, positive changes.

5. "DON'T BE TOO PREOCCUPIED WITH THE BOTTOM LINE."

For educators and school board members, "the bottom line" is, in the long-run, provision of an excellent and equitable education for all students. In the shorter-run, it is a myriad of things. These include drop-out rates, graduation rates, achievement scores, and implementation of the education and service programs needed by public school students and their families. Dr. Nanus does not suggest that these objectives are not of critical importance, but that focusing on short-term results often makes it more difficult to "think strategically." He uses another example from business to illustrate the point:

> "Many progressive companies rate their customers first in priority, their workers second, and investors only third when it come to making hard choices. They know that if they do the right thing they will secure the loyalty and support of customers and workers, and rewards to investors will follow. But if they worry first about the bottom line, they are likely to make decisions that cut corners in the marketplace or fail to engage the staff. In the long run, the investors will suffer most."

We have only to substitute the appropriate words for education to see the efficacy of this example:

> Progressive school districts hold their students first in priority, their teachers and school staffs second, and public demands third when it comes to making hard choices. These school board members and superintendents know that if they make decisions that will enhance the ability of students to learn and teachers to teach, they will secure the confidence and support of students, school personnel and parents, and rewards to the community will follow. But if they worry first about the results — the numbers, the scores, the statistics — they are likely to make decisions that are educationally unsound or that fail to engender support. In the long run, the community will suffer most.

6. "BE FLEXIBLE AND PATIENT IN IMPLEMENTING THE VISION."

There are usually many different ways to achieve any goal. By encouraging maximum involvement of school personnel and school community members in planning and implementing your school district's vision, you will allow them to share ownership of the vision, to accept responsibility for it, and to have the sense of accomplishment that comes from making it work. When you encourage involvement, however, you must be ready and willing to commend people for their initiatives and to tolerate their mistakes.

Dr. Nanus suggests another benefit to be derived from engaging others in the process. "Apart from the energizing aspects of such an approach, it also allows for many small experiments and learning experiences to take place, and it insulates the organization from major errors that almost surely would follow from top-down planning or supervision."

7. "NEVER GET COMPLACENT."

The best time to plan for the future and talk about making improvements is when things are looking their best. It is a Herculean task to suggest new directions and to try to implement changes when times are hard or a crisis situation has developed. No one wants to talk about visions for the future or new, innovative approaches when there are serious problems at hand. It is important to make the time to develop your school board's vision and to put into place a systematic, continuing process that will enable you to respond to the externally triggered changes which have potential for impacting on your schools.

What could be more important?

The importance of visionary leadership cannot be overstated. Setting an educational vision reflects the best of the past and provides for the future. It builds on experience gained over decades of experimental programs and, at the same time, expresses the increasing value of education to the local community and the national economic system. It emphasizes students as individuals and as our future's leaders. It enhances the importance of developing a sense of professionalism and critical worth in our teachers.

It recognizes the importance of developing partnerships within the education community in order to provide our children with the opportunities to succeed in this complex, global society. It clearly delineates the role of the local school board, in the words of NSBA's New Realities statement, "to help preserve our nation's liberty, prepare our economy for prosperity, and enrich the lives of our people — all through continually striving to foster excellence and equity in public elementary and secondary education for all our children."

That, in a nutshell, is "visionary leadership." It is the means for achieving education's mission in America. And, it is the local school board that can best bring together all of the community in our democracy — parents, community groups, and all others concerned about education — in an effective and responsible way to initiate the vision and sustain lasting change in our schools. ■